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Allegiances

HiddenClan
Leader-Skystar: blue-gray tom with amber eyes
Deputy-Ravenwing: black tom with a white chest
Medicine Cat-Mistypool: gray and white tabby she-cat
Warriors-
-Thrushfeather: golden-brown tom with dark flecks
-Raccoontail: long-haired gray she-cat with a black face and two tail rings
-Darknight: dark brown tabby tom
-Olivenose: dark brown she-cat with green eyes
-Birchleap: pale gray tom with black stripes
-Goldenheart: golden tabby she-cat with white paws
-Pineclaw: strong brown tabby tom
-Flameheart: orange tabby she-cat with amber eyes
-Nightfang: black tom with amber eyes
-Briarfrost: beautiful ginger, gray, and white tabby she-cat with green eyes
-Wolfgaze: dark gray tom with white points
-Sableclaw: cream-colored she-cat
-Hollowdrift: pale ginger tabby tom
Apprentices-
-Crowpaw: dusty black tom (mentor: Darknight)
-Rowanpaw: red-brown tom with spotted tabby markings and green eyes (mentor: Ravenwing)
-Hazelpaw: tortoiseshell and white she-cat with hazel eyes (mentor: Raccoontail)
-Lilacpaw: pale brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes (mentor: Mistypool)
Queens-
-Starlingwing: tortoiseshell she-cat
-Ashcloud: long-haired gray she-cat (mother to Thrushfeather's kits: Thunderkit and Fawnkit)
-Wrenpaw: brown and white tabby she-cat (mother to Wolfgaze's kits: Falconkit, Honeykit, Mousekit, and Brindlekit)
Kits-

-Thunderkit: stout, long-haired gray tom (mother: Ashcloud)
-Fawnkit: golden-brown she-kit with white flecks (mother: Ashcloud)
-Falconkit: red tabby tom with white points (mother: Wrenpaw)
-Honeykit: golden tabby she-kit with amber eyes (mother: Wrenpaw)
-Mousekit: small dark gray tom (mother: Wrenpaw)
-Brindlekit: brown and white tabby she-kit (mother: Wrenpaw)
Elders-
-Fernshade: light brown tabby she-cat

RainClan
Leader-Brookstar: light gray tabby she-cat with green eyes
Deputy-Darkwater: dark gray tom with amber eyes
Medicine Cat-Quietrain: blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes
Warriors-
-Pebblestream: gray she-cat with darker flecks
-Toadleap: light brown tabby tom
-Ivysplash: silver tabby she-cat with black stripes
-Willowsong: long-haired brown and white tabby she-cat
-Foxtooth: russet tom with black paws
-Daisypetal: cream-colored she-cat
-Sunspots: white tom with ginger patches
-Mossbreeze: lithe black she-cat with green eyes
-Liongaze: large, long-haired golden-brown tom
-Flowercloud: black and white she-cat
-Shrewtooth: dark brown tabby tom
Apprentices-
-Tansypaw: brown and white tabby she-cat (mentor: Quietrain)
-Frostpaw: silver and white tabby she-cat with blue eyes (mentor: Pebblestream)
Queens-
-Roseflight: long-haired ginger tabby she-cat (mother to Darkwater's kits: Mousekit, Plumkit, Coyotekit, and Yewkit)
Kits-
-Mousekit: small dark gray tom (mother: Roseflight)
-Plumkit: long-haired ginger tabby she-kit (mother: Roseflight)
-Coyotekit: large ginger tabby tom (mother: Roseflight)
-Yewkit: ginger and gray tabby she-kit (mother: Roseflight)
Elders-

-Marshfur: brown and white tabby tom

SwiftClan
Leader-Hawkstar: dark brown tabby tom with a white chest
Deputy-Cloudheart: lithe white she-cat
Medicine Cat-Driftsong: pale gray she-cat
Warriors-
-Eaglewing: dark brown tabby tom with a white-tipped tail
-Falconeye: light brown tabby tom with amber eyes
-Russetlight: russet tabby she-cat
-Runningcreek: silver tabby she-cat
-Stoneclaw: dark gray tom
-Sagetail: brown and white tabby she-cat
-Twistfoot: large tabby tom with a lame paw
-Tawnyfeather: tortoiseshell she-cat
-Windgorse: black tom with a white chest
-Eclipsepool: black and white she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentices-
-Gentlepaw: small gray tabby she-cat (mentor: Cloudheart)
-Vinepaw: pale brown tom with dark brown stripes (mentor: Falconeye)
-Fogpaw: pale gray and white tom (mentor: Tawnyfeather)
-Amberpaw: ginger tabby she-cat (mentor: Eclipsepool)
-Kestrelpaw: light brown tabby tom (mentor: Windgorse)
-Snowpaw: gray and white she-cat (mentor: Stoneclaw)
Queens-None
Kits-None
Elders-
-Adderstrike: dark brown tabby tom

Prologue

[image]

Shadows and fog clouded the forest, twisting and weaving through the trees. There was a coldness in the air that seeped into every living thing. In the center of a clearing, a cat began to wake. Her long gray and white coat blended in with the fog, making her nearly invisible.

She surveyed her surroundings cautiously and her fur stood on end. Where was she? This wasn't StarClan! "Hello?" She called out nervously. "Is anyone there?"

From the shadows, something moved. Her ears flattened against her head and she prepared to fight. A pair of amber eyes blinked at her. Then they claimed the body of a sturdy tabby tom. "Are you alone?" He asked, but it sounded more like an order.

The she-cat frowned in confusion but nodded. "Yes, I believe so?"

The tom turned and motioned for her to follow him. She trailed after him, wondering what this was about. Why were they in this gloomy forest rather than StarClan? And why did he seem so concerned about whether or not she was alone?

"Who are you?" She wondered out loud as they made their way through the shadows.

"I am Hiddenstar," The tom answered. "And you are Mistypool, medicine cat of HiddenClan."

Mistypool opened her mouth to speak but shut it. What was the founder of HiddenClan doing here, talking with her? Did he have a message? Perhaps a prophecy?

Through the trees, Mistypool glimpsed a cliff face rising above the tree canopy. A cave mouth soon yawned before them, and Mistypool paused. She wasn't sure that she wanted to go in there.

Something about it made her nerves crackle.

Hiddenstar casually strolled into the darkness of the cave, and Mistypool gathered her courage to follow him. The shadows engulfed her and a shiver ran down her spine. She couldn't see anything past her nose.

"What is this place?" Mistypool asked.

"You'll see in a moment." Hiddenstar meowed from somewhere in front of her.

Up ahead, she could see a dim light. Her eyes squinted in an effort to see better. The closer they got, the brighter the light became. Suddenly, the tunnel gave way to a ginormous cavern which was filled with an ominous blue light.

At the center of the cavern, Mistypool saw that the source of the light was a stone taller than a tree. It towered over them to nearly touch the ceiling of the cavern. Near the base of the stone were strange markings etched into the stone.

"What is this?" Mistypool's voice shook in the presence of the stone. She sensed something evil about it.

"Tell me something, Mistypool," Hiddenstar circled her and then looked back at the stone. "Is there perhaps an apprentice in HiddenClan who sends chills up your spine? Maybe someone you had nightmares about?"

Mistypool felt those very chills along her spine, but she tried to push the thought away. "He's a hard-working apprentice. He saved Hazelpaw's life. It's not his fault!"

"It was a rather unusual pregnancy, was it not?" Hiddenstar drawled his words out. "Not to mention there was no father present."

"Plenty of she-cats never name the father of their kits," Mistypool argued, but she was trying to convince herself.

Suddenly, Hiddenstar was right in her face. "Listen to me, Mistypool. A great evil is locked away in this stone. There's only

one way that it could have returned to the waking world, and that is through tainting. Rowanpaw is Tainted."

"No, you're lying!" Mistypool growled. She refused to believe that there was an evil bone in Rowanpaw's body.

"I wish I was." Hiddenstar's voice was even and deadly serious. "You need to watch him. If he decides to embrace the darkness inside him, it'll be disastrous for all the clans."

Mistypool's vision started to fade, but she fought it. She had so many questions. Her body felt heavy and then she dropped.

Chapter 1

[image]

Rowanpaw turned his eyes up to Tallrock where Skystar appeared. He padded over to the fresh-kill pile and dropped the thrush and mouse he'd caught on his hunt. Ravenwing didn't know that he went out alone, but frankly Rowanpaw didn't care. After what happened he wasn't sure if he could ever trust his mentor again. Ravenwing wasn't his father.

The red-brown tabby tom sat down near the back with his green eyes fixed on the HiddenClan leader. He hardly noticed that he sat by himself: he was used to it. Rowanpaw saw Wolfpaw, Sablepaw, and Hollowpaw gathering beneath the Tallrock. He realized that they were probably becoming warriors.

Rowanpaw dug his claws into the dirt and held back a growl. Ever since they were kits, Wolfpaw tormented him and called him demeaning names like *Death*kit or paw.. The dark gray tom was vicious to him, and Rowanpaw wanted nothing more than to tear him apart. It certainly didn't help that Wolfpaw was the father of his adopted sister's kits. Wrenpaw was stuck in the nursery while he and Crowpaw were training.

"Cats of HiddenClan," Skystar's voice rang out across the clearing. "It brings me great joy to announce that these three apprentices have passed their assessments and are ready to become warriors!" The clan began to cheer and in that time Skystar leaped down to stand in front of the three apprentices.

"Sablepaw, Hollowpaw, and Wolfpaw," Skystar looked upon the three apprentices proudly. "Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to defend this clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Sablepaw, Hollowpaw, and Wolfpaw all said in unison. Rowanpaw felt jealous of them. He couldn't wait to become a warrior.

"StarClan," Skystar raised his eyes to the darkening sky. The first stars were beginning to appear. "I ask you to look down upon these three apprentices. They have worked hard to understand your noble code and I name them warriors."

Skystar stepped forward to Sablepaw first. "Sablepaw, from this day forward, you will be known as Sableclaw. You're a quick fighter and a clever she-cat." Then he looked to Hollowpaw. "From this day on, you'll be known as Hollowdrift. You're intelligent, kind, and will make a wonderful warrior."

Rowanpaw narrowed his eyes with contempt when Skystar turned to Wolfpaw. The entire clan idolized him and completely ignored his wrong-doings. It made Rowanpaw sick with rage.

"Wolfpaw, you're a strong cat with your sights set on your future. For this, I've chosen your name to be Wolfgaze." Skystar announced.

With all three of them named, the clan began to cheer. Rowanpaw flattened his ears against their chants and slunk off towards the nursery. He hadn't seen Wrenpaw at the meeting and it's been awhile since he's seen her kits.

The shadows enveloped Rowanpaw as he stepped into the cozy nursery. Sitting near the entrance was Starlingwing. She didn't have any kits at the moment, she was just helping Wrenpaw. Whenever he looked at the tortoiseshell queen, all he could see was an older Hazelpaw. They looked incredibly alike.

"Rowanpaw," Starlingwing dipped her head to him before leaving the nursery.

Once Rowanpaw's eyes adjusted to the dimness, he could make out Wrenpaw lying in her nest. Her four young kits were tumbling around in the dirt. They were still awfully little, but soon they would leave the nursery for the first time. Rowanpaw's green eyes landed on Falconkit. The clan thought that he looked too much like Rowanpaw. Some even suspected him of being the kits' father.

Brindlekit was the first to notice him and she let out an excited squeal. "Rowanpaw! Rowanpaw!" She led the charge towards him

and he was soon at their mercy.

"Hey kits," Rowanpaw chuckled. He sat up and they slid down his back to fall in a pile.

"A badger has invaded HiddenClan!" Falconkit yowled, and the red tabby tom pounced on Rowanpaw's back.

"Grr!" Rowanpaw lumbered around like a badger as the kits tried to attack him. "I'm a hungry badger and a HiddenClan kit would be a nice, juicy snack!"

"Rowanpaw," Wrenpaw giggled. She padded over and picked up Mousekit by his dark gray scruff. "They're supposed to be settling down to sleep."

One by one, the kits slid off of him. "Aw, come on mama," Honeykit whined, lashing her golden tabby tail. "Just a little longer?"

"Nope, off to the nest," Wrenpaw ushered the kits towards the moss-laden nest. "The stars are already out."

Rowanpaw sat down and watched them get ready to sleep. It made him wish that his own mother had lived to dote on him like that. She had died at his kitting, taking his littermate with her. Rowanpaw's heart twisted when he remembered Sweetkit. His dead littermate used to visit him in his dreams...but he hasn't seen her in a moon.

"Mama, can Rowanpaw tell us a story?" Brindlekit asked as a wide yawn parted her jaws. Her brown and white tabby pelt made her appear like half a shadow. She matched her mother nearly perfect.

"I'm sure that your uncle has better things to do," Wrenpaw meowed.

Rowanpaw opened his mouth to speak but then closed it. He wanted to tell them a story, but what would he tell? *Oh, kits there was that one time your father almost killed me! And another time that your grandfather almost killed me, oh! and what about the fact that I'm not your real uncle?*

Rowanpaw flattened his ears in defeat. They wouldn't want to hear his stories, nor did he want to tell them. He wanted them to keep their innocence for as long as possible.

He left the nursery and the happy family behind.

Chapter 2

[image]

The sun had barely risen over the forest and Rowanpaw slipped out of camp for some early morning hunting. He often did this from time to time in an effort to escape the scrutinizing stares of his clanmates. If Ravenwing did take him training, it was usually after sun-high. Rowanpaw couldn't allow himself to fall behind the other apprentices, so he worked twice as hard.

Most mornings he joined the dawn patrol, with or without Ravenwing. Then afterwards he went hunting or practiced the battle moves Ravenwing's been teaching him. He fought with such ferocity that during training drills, Ravenwing had started pitting him against two cats.

Sometimes in the morning, Poisonblood would visit him. The mysterious tom was quickly becoming Rowanpaw's biggest supporter. He taught him how to defend himself against his tormentors. Rowanpaw began to seek him out willingly the more comfortable he became.

It's been a moon or more since Sweetkit has visited him in his Dreamscape. Nowadays, he spent his dreams mock-fighting with Poisonblood. Once, Rowanpaw thought that he caught a whiff of her scent but then it disappeared. He could've sworn that she was avoiding him.

Other than the whispering breeze and the rustle of little animals, the forest was silent. The dawn patrol would be along the borders, far away from here. Rowanpaw enjoyed the solitude. It was easier for him to think. Not only that, but the silence didn't bully him.

At the edge of his vision, Rowanpaw saw a squirrel. It moved cautiously through the undergrowth with alert eyes. His claws unsheathed and he lowered himself to the ground like a snake. He moved forward silently, blending in with the shadows. The squirrel continued to scavenge for food and was completely unaware of him.

Rowanpaw shifted his weight to his haunches and prepared to strike. He launched himself at the squirrel, easily pinning it down beneath his claws. It stopped breathing, so Rowanpaw picked up his prize. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a thrush hopping along the forest floor.

Rowanpaw gently set down his squirrel and began to stalk the thrush. When he got close enough, Rowanpaw lunged. The thrush slipped through his paws to take to the air. Rowanpaw growled in frustration. Without thinking, he launched himself into the air after the thrush.

It was easier than he thought to bat the bird out of the air. He pinned it beneath his claws to deliver the deadly blow. Now he had two catches to bring back to the clan, but what difference did it make? The clan still treated him like an outsider and they always would.

"Still an outcast?" The sudden appearance of Poisonblood made him jump.

"Could you not sneak up on me like that?" Rowanpaw replied with annoyance as he lashed his tail angrily.

Poisonblood ignored him and promptly evaluated him. The large, russet tabby tom circled him with a calculating black gaze. "You look stronger. Have you been practicing without me?"

"Actually, Ravenwing has been training me more lately." Rowanpaw unsheathed his claws and dug them into the soil. He was itching to fight with Poisonblood. "Want to practice?"

Without warning, Poisonblood launched himself at Rowanpaw who dodged him with little effort. All of his extra training has made him faster, stronger, and quicker on his paws. Whatever kit-fluff that remained was now gone. Rowanpaw was the perfect image of a strong warrior. It wouldn't be long until his name reflected that.

Rowanpaw turned and slashed Poisonblood across the cheek. In return, Poisonblood clawed his shoulder. There was a slight stinging but Rowanpaw ignored the pain. He dived underneath Poisonblood

and hit him right in his tendons. The larger tom stumbled which gave Rowanpaw the opportunity to pin him down altogether. He dug his claws in the russet tabby tom, refusing to let go.

Poisonblood's eyes glowed red, but they were filled with surprise. "You have been practicing. Let me up." Rowanpaw obeyed. "Has your clan been tormenting you?" He asked.

"No," Rowanpaw glanced away. He didn't want to admit that Wolfgaze, Nightfang, and some others still verbally abused him. It's been at least a moon since they've engaged him in physical fights; it's almost as if they could sense his newfound strength.

"They fight you because they fear you," Poisonblood meowed, studying him up and down. It's almost as if Poisonblood could read his mind. "Your strength makes them uneasy."

Rowanpaw flattened his ears against his head. "I don't want to be feared. I just want my clan to treat me like one of them."

Poisonblood huffed and rolled his eyes. "Then, you're a fool." He lunged at Rowanpaw at incredible speed and pinned him down before Rowanpaw could blink. Rowanpaw squirmed underneath Poisonblood's razor sharp claws. "It's time that you learned your destiny, Rowanpaw."

"Then tell me!" Rowanpaw snapped, baring his fangs. "You keep dangling your intentions in front of me but never reveal the truth!" In a quick flash, Rowanpaw swiped Poisonblood's legs out from under him then used the momentum to pin the larger tom down. "Tell me the truth!"

A crooked grin spread across Poisonblood's face. He seemed impressed by Rowanpaw's ferocity. "Let me up and I'll tell you."

Rowanpaw hesitated but finally moved so that Poisonblood could stand up. He watched the russet tabby tom shake out the dirt and leaves from his pelt. They stood eye to eye, making Rowanpaw realize how tall he's grown. He stood nearly as tall as Poisonblood.

"Why do you care so much about me?" Rowanpaw murmured,

glancing down at his paws. "No one else has ever cared for me, well, maybe one cat. But no one else spares me a glance, so why do you?"

Poisonblood's whiskers twitched with amusement as his eyes turned to an unnatural purple. "Rowanpaw, haven't you guessed?"

Rowanpaw shook his head with confusion. "No? Guessed what?"

Poisonblood heaved a great sigh then met Rowanpaw's gaze. "Rowanpaw, I'm your father."

~*~

A/N
First, I'd like to apologize for neglecting Tainted Blood for so long. It was never my intention. Second, I'm planning on finishing the story, I just need to reacquaint myself with how I want the story to end. Thank you for your patience!

Chapter 3

[image]

Rowanpaw's pelt bristled with surprise and rage. "What?!" He snarled, ears pinned flat against his head. His claws unsheathed subconsciously to dig into the dirt beneath his paws. "You're my father?"

Poisonblood rolled his eyes and huffed nonchalantly. "Don't be so dramatic. I'm sure somewhere in the recess of your mind, you suspected the truth." He motioned towards their pelts which were nearly identical: "You're the spitting image of me."

Rowanpaw began to pace, this new revelation making his mind swirl with unease. A growl rumbled in his throat as the frustration welled inside of him like a growing flame. "This whole time, you *knew*." Rowanpaw whirled on him, uncontrolled rage burning in his emerald orbs. "You *knew* that I was your son and you didn't tell me? Why?!"

The large russet tabby tom simply shrugged. "I knew you weren't ready. You weren't ready to hear what being my kin meant."

"What do you mean?" Rowanpaw wondered, narrowing his eyes with bewilderment. What could Poisonblood possibly be talking about? This meant that he had a father, that he mattered to someone in the world.

Then, Rowanpaw froze and a coldness took over him faster than a leaf-bare storm. This meant that his clanmates were right: he was a rogue's son. He swayed a little on his paws, feeling suddenly dizzy. They were right. The very circumstances of his birth were enough for the clan to excommunicate him.

Poisonblood stood up and touched the tip of his tail to his shoulder. "If only your clan knew...you'd have no place among them. Rowanpaw...you're an outsider to them, someone who will never be one of them."

Rowanpaw didn't want to believe Poisonblood. He wanted to believe that there might still be hope for him to carve a place for himself within HiddenClan. But everything Poisonblood, his *father*, said made sense. They would never see him as their clanmate.

"Listen, Rowanpaw," Poisonblood meowed softly, softer than the lull of a forest stream, "I'm the only one that will ever care for you, love you. The Clans will destroy you the first chance they get."

"You're wrong," Rowanpaw growled slightly. He looked up to meet his father's careful stare. "Not everyone in the Clans are evil." Hazelpaw came to mind and her unwavering loyalty to him which he still didn't fully comprehend. "As long as they don't know I'm a rogue's son, I can make a life in HiddenClan."

He wanted so badly to be a clan cat. Even if his father was a rogue, his mother was a HiddenClan warrior. There was a part of him that belonged there, even if Poisonblood couldn't see it.

At the thought of his mother, Rowanpaw brightened. Poisonblood could probably tell him more about her than any of his clanmates. "Poisonblood, what was my mother like?" Rowanpaw asked hopefully.

The mention of Ivorymoon hardened Poisonblood's gaze to stone. "Let's leave the past where it belongs, Rowanpaw."

Suddenly, the thrumming of paw-steps from the trees made both of them tense. Rowanpaw flicked an ear back towards the sound; whoever it was would appear any moment through the undergrowth. He looked to Poisonblood to see the tom's shape already shimmering away.

Before Poisonblood disappeared, Rowanpaw heard his voice whisper: "If I could've named you, I would've named you Shatterkit because the day you were born, my heart shattered." Then his shape completely faded away.

Through the undergrowth came a familiar tortoiseshell and white she-cat. Hazelpaw. "Rowanpaw!" She gasped, startled. "What're you doing out here?"

He shook his pelt, trying to brush off his conversation with Poisonblood. "I'm hunting for Fernshade," He lied. "She was craving a vole but there were none on the pile."

Hazelpaw stared at him with disbelief flickering in her brown-green eyes. "I know for a fact that there were two voles on the fresh-kill pile this morning before I left with the dawn patrol."

Rowanpaw's pelt burned with shame now that she caught him in his lie. "Well...someone must've ate them."

She flicked her tail in annoyance. "Look, Rowanpaw, I've always been honest with you. I've treated you with nothing but kindness, yet you push me away and lie. I don't understand why. I thought I'd made it clear that I care about you."

Rowanpaw opened his mouth to object, but she silenced him with a growl. "No, you listen to me." Hazelpaw lifted her chin defiantly. "I like you, Rowanpaw, but I'm not going to put up with your mood swings. Either you care about me, or you don't. It's that simple."

Hazelpaw turned on her heel angrily to storm off, but Rowanpaw leaped in her path to stop her. "Wait!" He hesitated with Poisonblood's words echoing in his mind: '*I'm the only one who will ever care for you, love you*'. Rowanpaw took a deep breath. "Hazelpaw, do you really mean that?"

She stared at him for a moment then finally replied, "Yes, mouse-brain. I wouldn't say something if it wasn't true."

Under the shade of the trees, shadows dappled her toritoiseshell and white pelt. She still had some kit-fluff, but she's grown a lot since her apprentice ceremony a moon before. Rowanpaw could glimpse the beautiful she-cat she would grow into, someone he couldn't believe would ever like him. But here she stood, professing her feelings to him without hesitation. He admired that about her.

"Hazelpaw, I do care about you," He admitted, finally saying what he's been holding back. "I just never thought someone like you could feel the same."

She purred with amusement, touching the tip of her tail to his shoulder. "Well, you have a funny way of showing it." Then she motioned for him to follow her. "Let's head back to camp. Clearly, the prey isn't running this morning."

Rowanpaw nodded slowly then followed her into the undergrowth. He glanced over his shoulder at the clearing where he learned the truth about his parentage. Just because Poisonblood was his father didn't mean he couldn't find his place in HiddenClan. After all, he was half HiddenClan.

And now, he knew that Hazelpaw cared about him. He didn't know if it would ever turn into something more than friendship, but at the moment, a friend was all he needed.

Chapter 4

[image]

When Rowanpaw returned to camp with Hazelpaw, he tensed at the scent of SwiftClan in the camp. "Hazelpaw," He whispered. "Stay behind me." He was surprised when she obeyed and let him enter camp first. If something went array, he was the older apprentice and could protect her.

At the center of camp, Skystar and Ravenwing greeted Hawkstar, the leader of SwiftClan. Rowanpaw started with surprise to see Eclipsepool accompanying Hawkstar along with Eaglewing, one of SwiftClan's senior warriors. She looked up and their eyes instantly locked.

"What is SwiftClan doing here?" Hazelpaw wondered as her pelt began to bristle.

He was wondering the same thing.

"I don't know," Rowanpaw replied carefully. As he thought about it, he wondered if it had anything to do with Gorsetail's death. Eclipsepool had shared her suspicions with him that the former SwiftClan deputy was murdered some moons back. Rowanpaw hadn't really considered it too much until now. Perhaps her suspicions held some truth.

"Well, I'm going to find Sablepaw and see what she thinks." Hazelpaw meowed before trotting off.

Rowanpaw didn't move to follow her. He wanted to see if he could talk to Eclipsepool to satisfy his curiosity. Plus, he enjoyed talking with Eclipsepool. She was the first cat who treated him like a normal clan cat. Even after several moons, she still treated him better than his clanmates. It was sad to admit that a SwiftClan cat viewed him with more respect than his own clan.

He hung in the shadows with his tail tucked neatly over his paws

and his green eyes focused intently on them. From this distance, it was hard to hear what was being said, but Rowanpaw could tell that Hawkstar was flustered. He's never seen the confident SwiftClan leader look so embarrassed. Clearly, he didn't like coming to HiddenClan for help or advice.

He must be desperate.

Rowanpaw scooted a little closer and pretended he was heading for the fresh-kill pile. He didn't dare get too close, but he got close enough that he could hear bits and pieces of their conversation.

He heard the tail-end of Hawkstar's phrase: "-scratches and blood. There were pine needles in his pelt, Skystar."

Skystar replied a little defensively, the fur along his spine raising, "What exactly are you implying, Hawkstar?"

"Put two and two together, Skystar," Hawkstar growled. "Gorsetail was killed in your territory."

Rowanpaw walked to the fresh-kill pile before they suspected him of eves-dropping. Everything they said is what Eclipsepool already told him when they met at the border. The only difference is now Hawkstar openly admitted it. At the Gathering, the SwiftClan leader seemed awfully intent on covering up the former deputy's death as heart failure.

He began to wonder if what Eclipsepool said was true, that Gorsetail was killed. If it was true, then who took his life? Rowanpaw didn't think a HiddenClan cat could be capable of such a thing, but he didn't know. The cruelest cat in the clan was Wolfgaze, but he only acted that way towards him. He might be a bully but he wasn't a murderer.

Another question sprung to his mind. If Hawkstar claimed that Gorsetail was killed on HiddenClan territory because of evidence, then that meant they found his body somewhere else. Why would the killer move Gorsetail's body? And why was there no evidence of murder on HiddenClan's side of the border? No blood, no scent, no loose fur, nothing.

Ravenwing spoke with agitation towards Hawkstar, but Rowanpaw couldn't hear what he said. Instead, he ambled off towards the apprentice den with a fresh vole in his jaws. His mind was whirling with possible explainations for Gorsetail's death: a fox had gotten him, perhaps a loner? That's when Rowanpaw stopped dead in his tracks.

What if Poisonblood had killed the SwiftClan deputy?

Poisonblood wouldn't leave a scent, so he'd be nearly undetectable. As far as Rowanpaw knew, the only one that could see Poisonblood was himself. It seemed that the mysterious tom, his *father*, only showed himself to those he wished to see him. Would that mean he was a murderer's son? In spite of this, Rowanpaw couldn't think of one reason Poisonblood would have for killing Gorsetail. What could he expect to gain from killing the former SwiftClan deputy?

Rowanpaw shook his head in disbelief. No, it didn't make sense for Poisonblood to be the murderer, even if he wouldn't put something like that past him. Although Poisonblood admitted to being his father, Rowanpaw couldn't deny the darkness surrounding him. He wasn't sure how much he could trust Poisonblood, even though he claimed to be helping Rowanpaw.

Poisonblood was his father... Rowanpaw could still hardly believe it. How could that be? Poisonblood seemed hardly a cat, relating more to an apparition. If he spoke the truth, then what did that mean for Rowanpaw? Was he partially an otherworldly being? He also found it suspicious that Poisonblood refused to talk about Ivorymoon. What could he be hiding?

"Hello, Rowanpaw."

He lifted his green gaze to find himself peering into those of Eclipsepool. The black and white she-cat's pelt glimmered in the sunlight. She watched him with guarded curiosity. If only she knew the troubles that plagued his mind, she wouldn't be so concerned about him then.

"Eclipsepool," Rowanpaw replied curtly. His eyes flitted over to where Skystar and Hawkstar were now in a heated discussion.

"Hawkstar doesn't really believe a HiddenClan cat is responsible for Gorsetail's death, does he?"

She shrugged, stifling a sigh. "I don't think Hawkstar knows what to believe. The clan has been uneasy after Gorsetail's death. They're afraid it's a sickness that'll spread, even though Driftsong has assured them it won't."

Rowanpaw rolled his eyes and huffed. "Are all SwiftClan cats that dim?"

That earned him a glare from Eclipsepool. "They're *scared*, Rowanpaw. Our deputy is dead and no one knows who or what killed him. Even StarClan is silent."

"Sorry, Eclipsepool," Rowanpaw apologized with genuine sincerity. He hadn't meant to offend her, but their problems seemed silly to his. "Maybe StarClan will send Driftsong a sign soon?"

Eclipsepool opened her mouth to reply but was cut off by Hawkstar calling for her. "I have to go. I'll talk to you at the next Gathering." She turned on her heel before bounding off to join her clanmates.

Rowanpaw watched her go sadly. A part of him wished that he could go with her. If SwiftClan didn't know the circumstances of his birth, then perhaps they might treat him better? He had no kin in HiddenClan other than Fernshade, no real reason to stay other than this was the clan of his birth. The clan where his mother was born. But if he was half rogue, or whatever Poisonblood was, then did it really matter?

After all, was he truly a HiddenClan cat?

~*~

A/N

Here's the update that you desperately deserved! Again, thank you for your patience. I'm a senior in college and I also work full-time, so life is crazy busy.